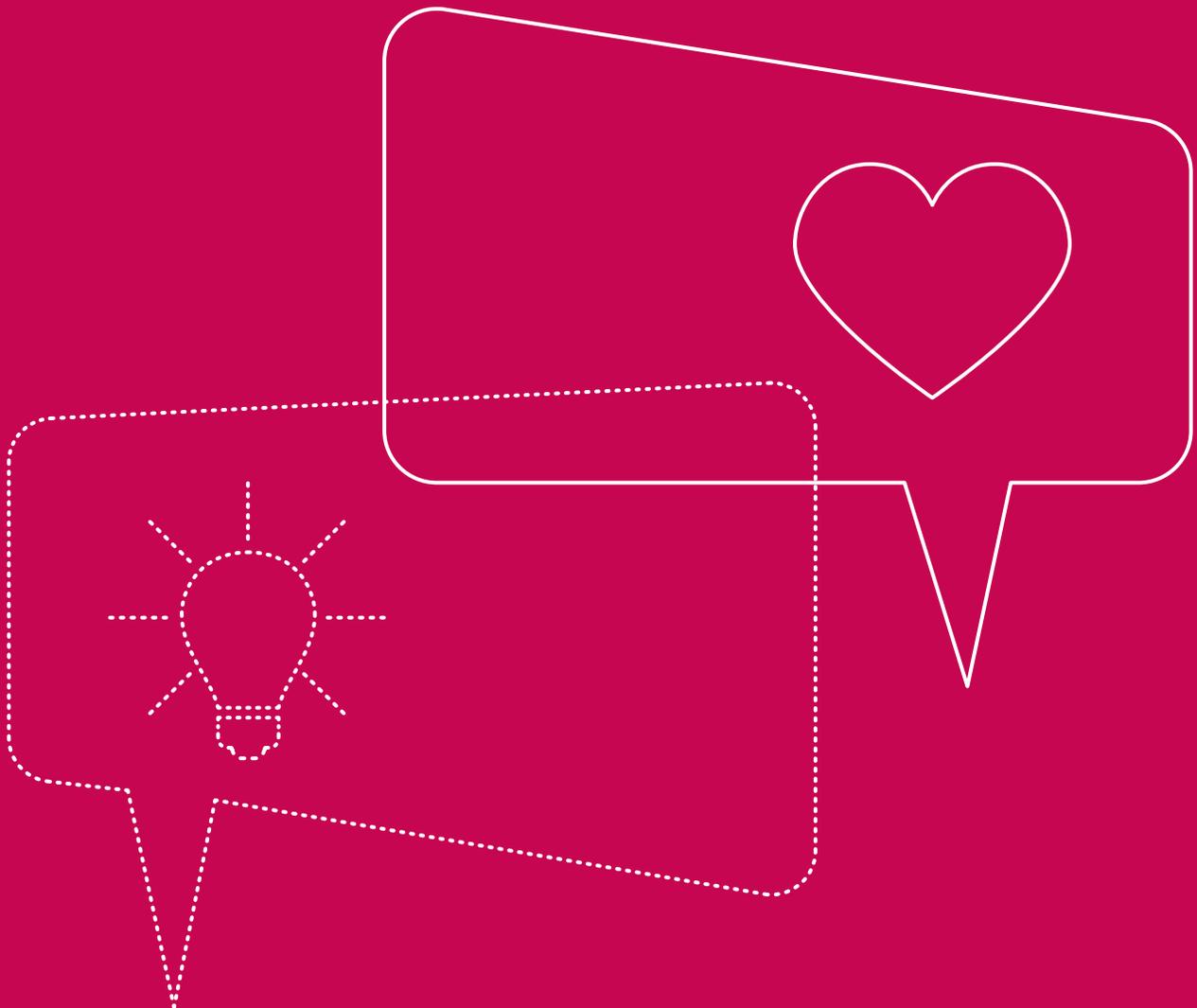


Meaningful Involvement of Women Who Use Drugs

The meaningful involvement of people who use drugs is an important part of any harm reduction program. Specifically involving women who use drugs can help ensure the program is addressing women’s needs. While there are many ways to involve women in meaningful ways, two specific examples described by women across Ontario were:

- 1 Consulting with women who use drugs
- 2 Employing women who use drugs

This booklet provides some tips about how to do this. Use it as a starting point to brainstorm strategies that may work well locally.



1 CONSULT WOMEN WHO USE DRUGS

Getting input and integrating feedback from women who use drugs is an essential step in building trust with women while ensuring programs are helpful and relevant.

Examples include:



Hold one-on-one or group consultations with women who use drugs



Establish a women-who-use-drugs advisory committee



Use participatory models of community development or community-based research that ensure participation from women

“I just want to use peer-run services. I trust people who I know understand my life and drugs from doing it themselves.”

“This woman who works there helped me out with tips about how to inject. It’s really helped me out a lot. I don’t have to rely on other people now, and also I don’t have as many scars.”

“I am getting support from someone with real life experience, not someone who just has an educational background. I want support from people who understand and have lived the lifestyle.”

When planning consultations, there are some considerations that can help to create a successful outcome:

Who is hosting it?

Engaging people from communities that have faced exclusion can sometimes be difficult because it requires a level of trust and engagement. This can be especially true for women who have faced stigma and discrimination about their drug use.



Tips

- Work with community partners who have established trust.
- Employ women who use drugs to facilitate or co-facilitate.

Who is invited?

Ensuring the inclusion of people who have historically been excluded or may not be connected to the program is important. Having a clear idea of who you want to hear from can help to inform how you do outreach and who you invite.



Tips

- Invite women who use drugs to do outreach to other women who use drugs.
- Consider reserving space or outreaching to particular populations of women who may face barriers accessing harm reduction programs.

What questions are being asked?

The types of questions asked impact the information collected.



Tips

- Brainstorm what questions to ask with local women who use drugs.
- Try the questions out 1:1 with women who use drugs to see if the questions get the information you're hoping for.

How are people engaged?

People have different comfort levels with different styles of engagement. Using methods of engagement that work for the community you're consulting with can help to get the information you're looking for.



Tips

- Explore different engagement tools and learning styles. These can be helpful in fostering participation from a range of communities.
- For some, a meeting or group setting works well. Others may be more comfortable to get together and talk while engaging in an activity such as art making, gardening, or meal sharing.
- For some, one-on-one conversations work better than group settings.

Time and place

Time and place impact who will attend.



Tips

- Holding consultations at times of day that work for the people you are inviting, and in spaces that are comfortable, accessible, and safe, is critical to fostering participation from communities that have been excluded. For example, a meeting first thing in the morning may be difficult to get to.

Payment

Income insecurity can be a barrier to participation for many people.



Tips

- Whenever possible, provide payment or honorariums, refreshments, and cover transportation costs for those participating. This helps to acknowledge and honour their contribution.

2 EMPLOY WOMEN WHO USE DRUGS

Employing people who use drugs is another key element of a strong harm reduction program.

Employing women who use drugs can help to:



build positive relationships with women who use drugs



provide important employment opportunities



foster a sense of comfort and safety



ensure the program is responsive to women's needs



create important opportunities for women who use drugs to share gender-specific information about harm reduction, including supplies, drug use practices, safety and other realities. Women who participated in this project noted that these conversations often do not happen if women with lived experience are not employed within the program.



When employing people who use drugs, it is important to have policies and procedures that ensure people who use drugs are not discriminated against in their workplace, have access to skills-building opportunities, and have supervision and support. For more information, contact the Ontario Harm Reduction Network ohrn.org or Ontario Organizational Development Program oodp.ca.

“Its really helpful when there are women who use drugs working in the programs. I feel safe and can talk to them.”